The Earliest Texts and Manuscripts Mentioning the Amazigh Peoples

The Amazigh people — known historically under many names such as Libu, Numidians, Moors, or Barbars — are among the oldest continuous populations of North Africa. Their homeland, today often called Tamazgha (North Africa), stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Siwa Oasis and from the Mediterranean to the Sahara. While the word Amazigh (Berbers) itself appears clearly in medieval sources, the ancestors of these communities were already recorded in the world's earliest texts.

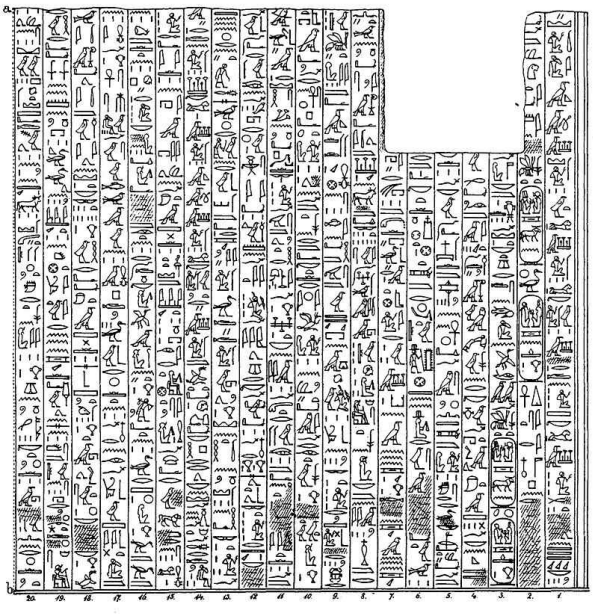
From Egyptian inscriptions on temple walls, to the accounts of Herodotus and Roman historians, to indigenous Libyco-Berber inscriptions carved in stone, the written record provides glimpses of Amazigh life across three millennia. Exploring these sources allows us to trace how outsiders described them, how they represented themselves, and when their true ethnonym first surfaced in literature.

1. Egyptian Beginnings

The first written traces appear in the Nile Valley. Already in Predynastic Egypt (c. 3200–3000 BCE), a ceremonial object known as the Tehenu Palette refers to the Tjehenu, neighbors west of the Nile. Later pharaohs regularly recorded wars and alliances with western peoples.

The Libyan Palette(Tehenu Palette). Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 27434, CG14238

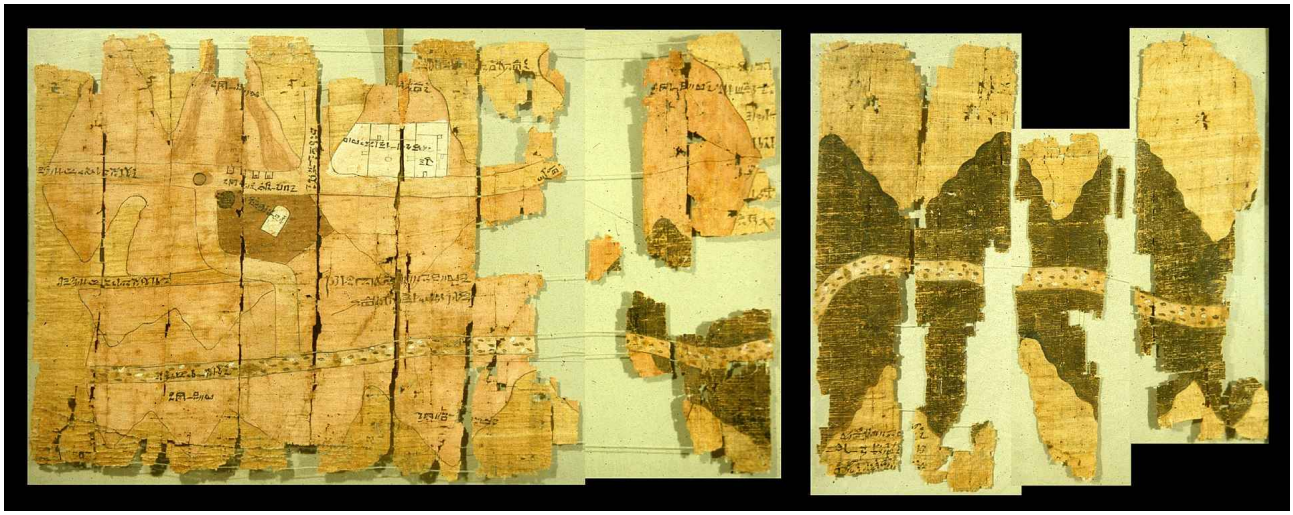
By the 13th century BCE, Egyptian inscriptions under Pharaoh Merneptah name the Libu (rbw) and the Meshwesh (mšwš)—tribes often linked with early Amazigh groups (often called the "Great Karnak Inscription" of Merneptah, c. 1208 BCE).



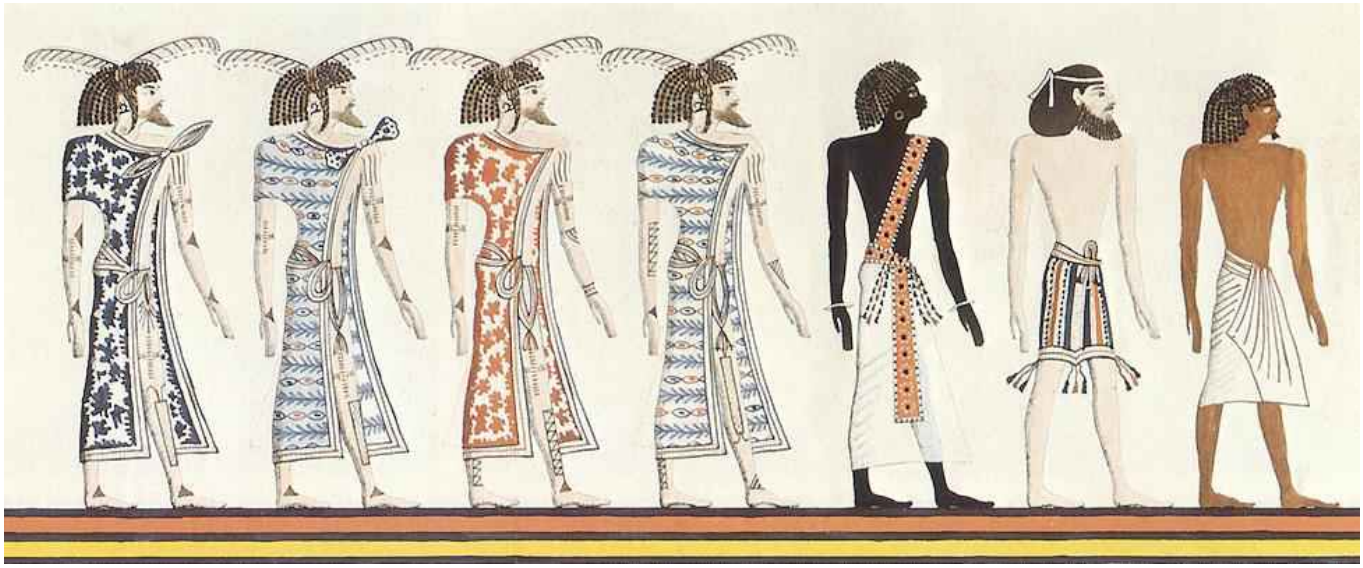
Great Karnak Inscription of Merneptah, c. 1208 BCE
First part of the inscription (lines 1-20, out of 79)

Another remarkable witness is the Qeheq Papyrus (Papyrus Turin CAT 21106), dating to c. 1290–1189 BCE (the 19th/20th dynasties of ancient Egypt). Written in Hieratic script, it is the longest surviving attestation of an ancient Amazigh (Berber) language (Libyco-Berber).

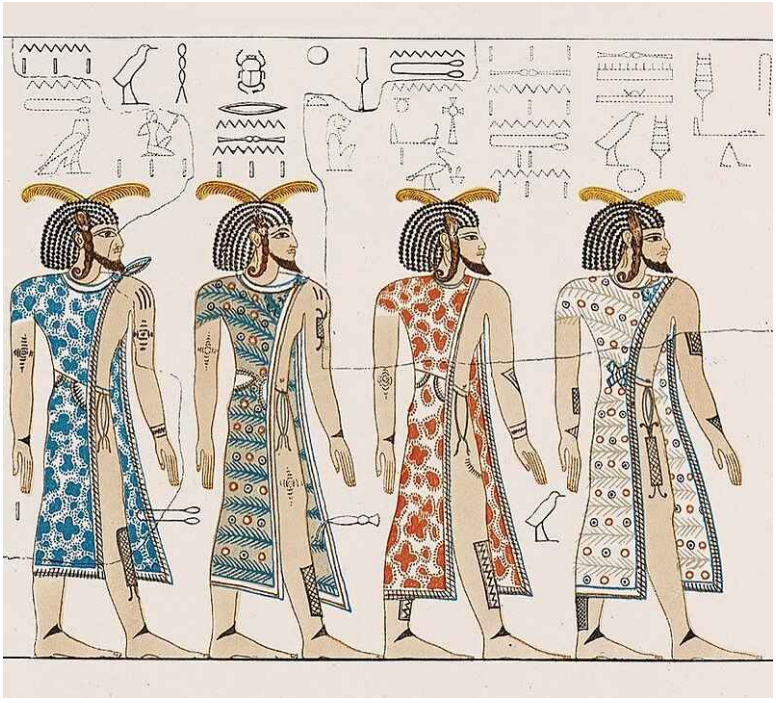
This document not only confirms the presence of Libyan peoples in Egyptian records but also preserves elements of their own tongue, offering an invaluable linguistic glimpse into early Amazigh ancestors.



The Qeheq Papyrus (Papyrus Turin CAT 21106) is a 19th-20th Dynasty (c. 1290–1189 BCE) artifact written in Hieratic script



From left to right four Libu men, a Nubian, an Assyrian, and an Egyptian (Heinrich von Minutoli)



Libyan Princes from the Tomb of Seti, as seen by Oric Bates

The Bible also preserves traces of these western neighbors. In several passages, it refers to Libyans under the names Lubim or Put. For instance, 2 Chronicles 12:3 lists the Lubim among Shishak's allies, while Nahum 3:9 mentions Put and Lubim as supporters of Egypt.

These Biblical "Libyans" are often understood as ancestors of North African peoples west of the Nile, linking Amazigh history to the broader ancient Near Eastern world.

2. Greek Ethnography

By the 5th century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus provided detailed accounts of "Libya," which for him meant all of North Africa west of Egypt. He described peoples such as the Maxyes, Nasamones, and Garamantes.

γυναῖκας δὲ νομίζοντες πολλὰς ἔχειν ἔκαστος ἐπίκοινον αὐτέων τὴν μῖξι
ν ποιεῦνται τρόπῳ παραπλησίῳ τῷ καὶ Μασσαγέται· ἐπεὰν σκίπωνα προ
στήσωνται, μίσγονται. πρῶτον δὲ γαμέοντος Νασαμῶνος ἀνδρὸς νόμος ἐ
στὶ τὴν νύμφην νυκτὶ τῇ πρώτῃ διὰ πάντων διεξελθεῖν τῶν δαιτυμόνων
μισγομένην· τῶν δὲ ὡς ἕκαστος οἱ μιχθῇ, διδοῖ δῶρον τὸ ἂν ἔχῃ φερόμεν
ος ἐξ οἴκου.

Reference of Nasamones (Νασαμῶνοι), Herodotus, Histories 4.172–175. Book IV

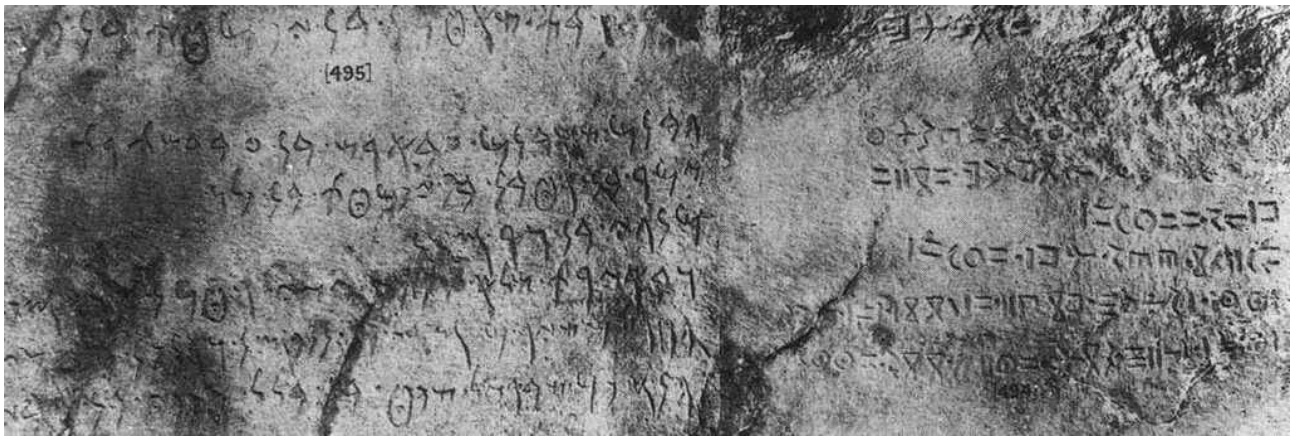
In chapters (172-175, 182, 190) he describes Nasamones (Νασαμῶνοι) territory near the Syrtis, their use of the oasis of Augila, their nomadic movements, and their oath-swearing customs. Also refering Maxyes/Maxyans (in chapters 191,193) and Garamantes (in chapters 174, 183, 184)

His work remains the first extended ethnographic testimony about Amazigh societies — their farming, nomadism, and desert life.

3. Indigenous Writing

From about the 3rd–2nd century BCE, we begin to see inscriptions written by Amazigh people themselves. The Libyco-Berber script (ancestor of modern Tifinagh) appears on stones, tombs, and monuments from Morocco to Libya.

One of the most important finds is the Dougga bilingual stele in Tunisia, inscribed in both Punic and Libyco-Berber. These inscriptions preserve local names and titles, giving us an internal voice from Tamazgha.



Dougga (Thugga) bilingual stele (Libyco-Berber with Punic, 2nd c. BCE),

4. Roman Historians

As Rome expanded into North Africa, Latin historians recorded Amazigh kingdoms and tribes. Sallust in the 1st century BCE described the Numidians and their war with Rome under King Jugurtha. He also mentioned the Mauri (Moors) and the Gaetuli.

… Nam de Carthagine silere melius puto quam parum dicere, quoniam alio properare tempus monet. Igitur ad Catabathmon, qui locus Aegyptum ab Africa dividit, secundo mari prima Cyrene est, colonia Theraeon, ac deinceps duae Syrtes interque eas Leptis, deinde Philaenon arae, quem locum Aegyptum versus finem imperi habuere Carthaginienses, post aliae Punicae urbes. Cetera loca usque ad Mauretaniam Numidae tenent, proximi Hispania[m] Mauri sunt. Super Numidiam Gaetulos accepimus partim in tuguriis, alios incultius vagos agitare, post eos Aethiopas esse, dein loca exusta solis ardoribus. ...

The Jugurthine War (Bellum Iugurthinum) – 19 – Sallust, The Latin Library

A century later, Pliny the Elder listed the peoples of Mauretania, Numidia, and the Sahara in his Natural History.

The province of Tingitana is 170 miles in length. It contains the following tribes: the Mauri (from whom it takes its name of Mauretania), by many writers called the Maurusii, were formerly the leading race, but they have been thinned by wars and are now reduced to a few families. The next race to this was previously that of the Masaesyli, but this has been wiped out in a similar manner. The country is now occupied by the Gaetulian tribes, the Baniurae and the Autololes, by far the most powerful of them all, and the Nesimi, who were formerly a section of the Autololes, but have split off from them and formed a separate tribe of their own in the direction of the Ethiopians.

Pliny the Elder, Natural History (Book 5) – 17 –

The term Mauri endured well beyond the Roman age. It was used by writers such as Procopius in his Vandal War (6th century CE) to describe the autochthonous populations of North Africa, who are widely considered the ancestors of today's Amazigh communities. This continuity of naming across centuries reflects both the persistence of local identities and the shifting perspectives of Mediterranean empires.

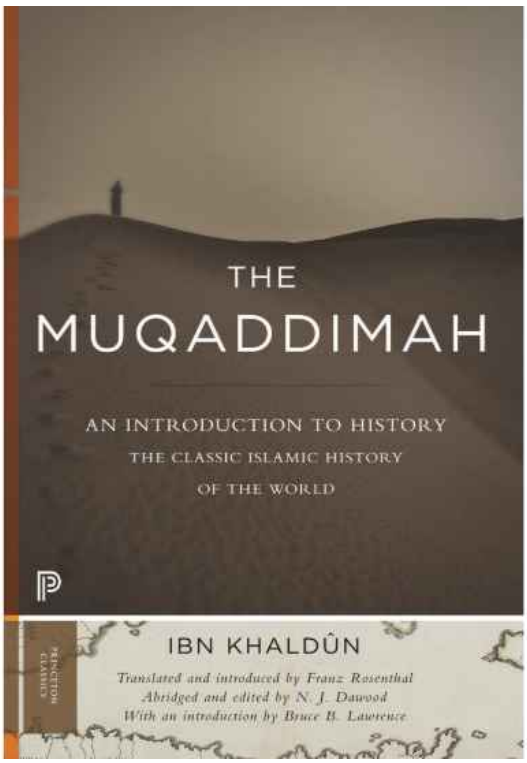
Mosaic of a Vandal horseman, Carthage, c. 500

5. The Amazigh Name in Medieval Sources

While ancient texts use exonyms like Libu, Numidians, or Moors, the actual ethnonym Amazigh (plural Imazighen) surfaces clearly in medieval Arabic historiography.

Authors such as Ibn Ḥazm (11th c.) and later Ibn Khaldūn (14th c.) trace the peoples of North Africa back to an ancestor named Mazigh, directly connecting to the identity still alive today.

The historian Ibn Khaldun says the Berbers were descendants of Barbar, the son of Tamalla, son of Mazigh, son of Canaan, son of Ham, son of Noah.



THE MUQADDIMAH - IBN KHALDÛN
An Introduction To History - The Classic Islamic History Of The World

Statue of Ibn Khaldun in Tunis

Ibn Khaldun's handwriting on the left,
certifying manuscript MS C. Atif Efendi 1936, of the Atif Efendi Library

A Long Memory

Taken together, these texts and inscriptions show that the Amazigh stood firmly within the historical record—as neighbors, rivals, and allies noted by the great civilizations of the Mediterranean, and eventually as authors of their own inscriptions in Libyco-Berber. From the Tehenu Palette (3200–3000 BCE) to Ibn Khaldūn (14th c.), the written word preserves over three millennia of testimony about the peoples of Tamazgha.